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ABSTRACT

A public school in Brooklyn, New York, has developed a system in which handicapped children are integrated into the life of the school. Special education classes are paired with nonhandicapped classes. They share a variety of activities, including presenting assembly programs or plays, going on joint field trips, and sharing appropriate physical education programs. The paired classrooms combine teachers as well in a team teaching style. Such a system has many advantages: it enhances relationships between teachers as well as children from both classes; it promotes an atmosphere of acceptance, focusing on similarities rather than differences; and it uses the strengths of the teaching staff to program for individual needs. Further, the pairing system can prepare students and teachers for mainstreaming. (CL)

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# PAIRING - A PRECURSOR TO MAINSTREAMING

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Parents and professionals who are involved in the education of handicapped children have created a mystique while fighting to meet the needs of the children. The non-handicapped world looks at the special child as one who needs more attention, who can't get along with the group, who is disruptive and unruly, who doesn't want to learn and who doesn't permit others to learn. As we pay more attention to the concepts of mainstreaming and least restrictive environment, we realize that the mainstream teacher has been indoctrinated with the idea that she cannot teach the special child. Special education teachers have become very protective of their children and yet search diligently for a mainstream environment in any subject area or social program that will help the special child. There is a tremendous need to build bridges of understanding between the special education teacher and the mainstream teacher.

P.S. 226, a school in the middle of Brooklyn, NY, is a very special place because of the large number of special education classes that are integrated into the life of the school. During the last fifteen years, classes for mildly

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and for severely physically handicapped students, classes for brain injured children, classes for educable and trainable mentally retarded children and classes for children who are both neurologically impaired and emotionally handicapped are housed in the building. As each new program was developed, the children were assimilated into the life of the school. All the children participated in all school-wide programs. They ate lunch in the lunchroom with the mainstream classes, went to weekly assembly programs, participated in class plays and programs, contributed to the school-wide Science Fair, the Art Exhibition, the Country Fair, Field Day and Science, Health and Quality of Life Institutes. Although all the classes were included in all the programs in a parallel structure, there was only a minimum of integration between children in the different programs. Just as children in parallel grade classes don't have much interaction among their classes, the same was true of the special education and regular classes.

We have come up with a plan that integrates all of the children within the school. Every special education class is paired with a non-handicapped class. Every non-handicapped class is paired with a special education class. What does pairing mean? How does it work? The two paired classes with their teacher share a variety of activities.

They cooperatively plan and present an assembly program or play. They engage in joint trips that are related to the curriculum areas that both classes learn. They share physical education programs where appropriate. They participate together in the grade Humanities Program. They use the talents of the two teachers in a team approach.

The pairing concept was started last year for assembly presentations with a few classes where success was highly predicted. It started to spread to field trips, class parties and special events because the children and the teachers got along so well.

This year, the program was instituted on a school-wide basis. Even those teachers who were fearful of the mix or who had less than positive attitudes toward the program were included. It is interesting to note the impact the children and teachers are having on each other. When classes are jointly performing on stage, it is impossible to tell who is in a learning disabled class, an emotionally handicapped class or a regular class. When classes are on a field trip together, it's awfully hard to pick out the mentally retarded or non-handicapped youngster. It is only when children have visible physical handicaps that the observer can say, "Those are special children."

Although the program is still fairly new, we have already seen many advantages. Pairing establishes relation-

ships between teachers. It sets up situations in which professionals can meet and talk and come to joint decisions. Relationships are established not only between the teachers but between the children of both classes. An atmosphere of acceptance is set so that children and teachers see each other as human beings rather than as handicapped or non-handicapped people. Removing the mystery of the handicapped seems to have a positive impact on everyone who is involved. The joint experiences focus on the aspects of similarity rather than on the differences. During the interaction, the students seem to see each other as individuals with a variety of strengths and weaknesses in different situations.

Pairing of classes resembles "team teaching" in terms of cooperative planning and varied use of personnel. Once the relationships have been established, it is easier to see where a youngster can have remedial help or enriched curriculum or a mainstreamed curriculum area in the "other" room. The richness of each teacher's experience can be more judiciously used as the sharing of the team's progresses. As they pair, teachers learn from each other in the areas of methodology, classroom management and curriculum adaptation. The pairing of a special education class with a register of 10 and a regular class with a register of 32 gives a pupil-teacher

ratio of 21 to 1 in a variety of activities.

We have found greater acceptance of children and their needs, an appreciation of colleagues and what they have to offer and a better understanding of federal and local mandates and their effects on the school since the inception of pairing.

Pairing is not mainstreaming. However, it does address itself to the same concept of the least restrictive environment. It creates an educational milieu in which a child can be recommended for mainstreaming on a partial or full-day basis without the fear of the unknown on the part of the child or the teachers.

The program is gaining momentum at P.S. 226 and it is exciting to watch the teachers and the students in both special education and regular classes interact in a positive and educationally enviable manner.

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